

## From Migrant to Worker: Global Unions and Temporary Labor Migration in Asia

Michele Ford (*New York: Cornell University Press, 2019*)

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## BOOK REVIEW

**From Migrant to Worker: Global Unions and Temporary Labor Migration in Asia,**  
Michele Ford (*New York: Cornell University Press, 2019*)

Michele Ford has two central themes to her most recent book. The first is for migrant workers to be regarded primarily as workers with labour rights rather than as migrants caught between the precarity of their migration status and peripheral position in the employment relations regime. The second theme is for local labour unions in the destination countries to ultimately integrate labour migration regimes with employment relations regimes. The book is a compelling account of how local unions in Asian countries – with the number of unions varying according to destination country and employment sector – came to embrace temporary labour migrants, typically unskilled to semi-skilled blue-collar workers with limited-term contracts, and the efforts taken to accord them their rightful place within the countries' employment relations regimes. In light of the many recent issues of migrant worker exploitation globally and in Asia particularly, the publication of this book is an opportunity for establishing a better understanding of the struggles of migrant workers and of local labour unions in adopting a pro-migrant stance.

The book begins by documenting the intricacies and nuances of both the labour migration and employment relations regimes in seven Asian destination countries. Ford identifies three elements that characterised the labour migration regimes in these countries; she writes on how temporary labour migration, complex migration regulations and rigid migrant labour contracts affect migrant workers' overall employment experience. Labour migration regimes dictate aspects such as the migrant workers' choice of destination countries, employment sector, duration of stay, and more importantly, the ability to redress exploitative employment conditions through legislative channels. The author then introduces the destination countries' employment relations regimes, analysing the regimes' coverage of migrant-dense employment sectors, mainstream union influence in such sectors, and the ability of migrant workers to either join existing unions or to form their own. Employment relations regimes are pivotal in upholding labour rights, where stronger regimes would inevitably translate into better employment treatment regardless of sector or migrant status. In Chapter 1, Ford has deftly portrayed migrant workers as being mired in the tangled intersection of the two regimes – labour migration and employment relations – that is, “foreign workers' migration status cannot be considered in isolation from their labor market position” (34).

For a long time, civil society groups were the ones who espoused the causes of migrant workers, while most labour unions disdainfully saw migrant workers as disrupting the labour market by undercutting wages and snatching jobs from the locals. Moreover, given rigid employment relations regimes and intricate labour migration regimes, migrant labour non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were more responsive to the plights of migrant workers. In Chapter 2, Ford documents the role of migrant labour NGOs in the region. Due to specific vulnerabilities related to gender and the nature of work, the NGOs' activism began by focusing predominantly on the rights of Indonesian and Filipina live-in domestic workers. Over time, their activism became more inclusionary, broadening their commitment to improve the work conditions for temporary labour migrants in the manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and service sectors. This is because “if a foreign domestic worker rings up, she is on her own; if a man calls up, there are usually 20 to 30 other people in the same

position” (49) – what Ford finds to be reflecting the gravity of work exploitations. Ford points out that regardless of the extent and intensity of their activism, the NGOs realised the need to reach out to local labour unions to formally represent the migrant workers; unions were typically the centrepiece of any employment relations regimes through which labour rights were operationalised.

Chapter 3 introduces the global union federations (GUFs) – the umbrellas under which regional affiliates and local labour unions in similar employment sectors operate and source their authority from. Ford focuses on how Europe-based GUFs became instrumental in shaping Asian labour unions’ attitudes towards temporary labour migrants. She describes how European Union (EU) expansion resulted in an unprecedented labour mobility upsurge in the form of temporary labour migration across EU countries and at the same time, how the increased activism of labour unions in Europe brought about significant shifts of identity for temporary labour migrants – from that of a migrant to that of a worker. The identity shift influenced the GUFs’ engagement of temporary labour migrants’ programmes and projects. Such engagements were, in turn, dictated by three factors: the GUFs’ funding agenda and capacity, the internal working of the GUFs, or what Ford terms as structural contingency, and the local context in which the GUFs-affiliated labour unions were immersed. Using examples of different GUFs, Ford then describes how the interplay of these factors translated into four different modes of engagement employed by the GUFs: policy advocacy, service provision, organising either the recruitment of migrants into local unions or the forming of migrant-only unions and collaboration ranging from supranational to local levels.


Mirroring the preceding chapter, Chapter 4 turns a microscopic lens on the GUFs’ migrant labour activism in Asia. Ford makes several salient points about how the GUFs, working through their regional affiliates and local unions in Asia, manoeuvred their way through a set of unique opportunities and challenges quite different from those of Europe. The funding agenda, availability and capacity of the GUFs’ head offices were critical in setting things into motion. Importantly, as revealed by one of Ford’s interviewees: “if there was no foreign funding, there’d be no activity on this issue” (10). Apart from financial resources, the approach, emphasis, extent and intensity of the GUFs’ migration-related programmes and projects in Asia hinged on the personal interests and convictions of several of the local unions’ key individuals. Nation-specific socio-political climate and local unions’ strength within the destination country’s employment relations regime were also undoubtedly crucial in determining the permeation of the GUFs’ temporary labour migration ideals in this part of the world. Ford seamlessly weaves in many pertinent examples of the GUFs’ migration initiatives in Asia, cutting across how GUFs in the seven countries used the four modes of engagement a little less conventionally than their European counterparts.

Ultimately however, how successful the GUFs were in Asia would depend on the actual changes in local unions’ attitudes towards labour migrants and in their efforts to place these migrants in a more palpable position within the country’s employment relations regime. In Chapter 5, Ford highlights three measures of success: the extent of the GUFs’ programmes in shifting the local unions’ stance to adopt a more positive attitude towards temporary labour migrants, the extent to which such a shift in stance is translated into actions and most importantly, whether such actions have brought about improved changes in the destination countries’ labour migration and employment relations regimes. Ford concludes that the rates of success in the seven destination countries are somewhat mixed, due to a myriad of aforementioned intertwining factors. There needs to be better orchestration between the GUFs and local unions in order to bring migrant workers to a more forefront position in the employment relations regimes, enabling them to work and live with dignity.

Ford is well known for her decades of work on this topic. However, *From Migrant to Worker* is not merely a compilation of her previous work. This book shows impeccable research and erudite discourse, addressing the issues of temporary labour migration and labour unions in Asia. Ford has effortlessly tied discussions from a multitude of angles into a coherent narrative. With almost encyclopaedic detail, the book is an authoritative reference on this issue and transcends both national and continental borders. With a focus on Asia, Ford's book is a needed complement to two other recent books: Frozzini and Law (2017) on migrant workers in Canada and the USA and the edited volume by Marino, Roosblad, and Penninx (2017) on trade unions and migrant workers in Europe. Apart from some sporadic cursory mentions of theoretical models in industrial relations, such as the pluralist model (121) and corporatist model (142), what is missing from the book is a chapter or a section on the theoretical underpinnings that drive the book's discussions. The omission is rather surprising, given that in some of the author's previous works, she has written in length on various approaches and theories. Another inadequacy in the book is the lack of detail on the questions asked in interviews with GUFs, affiliates and local unions.

## References

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